



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

EURASIA PROGRAM

RUSSIA'S COERCIVE DIPLOMACY

**WHY DID THE KREMLIN MASS ITS FORCES
NEAR UKRAINE?**



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FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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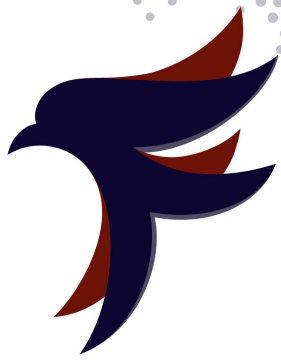
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Introduction

During March and April 2021, the Russian military conducted a large-scale buildup in its regions bordering Ukraine, including Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014. Scores of videos appeared on TikTok, Telegram, Twitter, and other social media sites showing Russian military equipment, including tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery, and air defense systems, moving toward or appearing in the vicinity of Ukraine's borders. The United States Department of Defense's spokesperson John Kirby told reporters that the Russian buildup was even larger than during the peak of the fighting in 2014.¹ Ukrainian officials estimated that the Russian military buildup would reach a total of 120,000 Russian troops with more than fifty-six battalion tactical groups (BTG).² United States defense officials gave a lower estimate that 48 BTGs had moved into the border area and 80,000 Russian troops were in Crimea or

elsewhere near Ukraine's borders.³ To put this in perspective, the Russian military has approximately 850,000-900,000 servicemembers in total, and 168 constant readiness BTGs, according to Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu.⁴ If these estimates were accurate, the Russian military massed roughly 10-15% of its total manpower and approximately one third of its BTGs near Ukraine's borders.

In response to the buildup, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, and President Joe Biden all called their Russian counterparts to discuss the situation. U.S. European Command (EUCOM) raised its alert status to its highest level. The buildup also coincided with an increase in fighting along the line of contact, with at least 36 Ukrainian servicemen killed thus far in 2021.⁵ The movement of Russian forces led to intense speculation about Russia's

1 "Russian military buildup near Ukraine larger than in 2014- Pentagon," *Reuters*, April 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/russian-military-buildup-near-ukraine-larger-than-2014-pentagon-2021-04-19/>.

2 Matthias Williams and Robin Emmott, "Ukraine says Russia will soon have over 120,000 troops on its borders," *Reuters*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-reach-over-120000-troops-ukraines-border-week-ukraine-says-2021-04-20/>; "В Минобороны Украины оценили общую численность стягивающихся к украинской границе российских войск в 110 тыс. человек," *Interfax*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.militarynews.ru/story.asp?rid=1&nid=548437&lang=RU>.

3 Michael R. Gordon and Georgi Kantchev, "Satellite Images Show Russia's Expanding Ukraine Buildup," *Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/satellite-images-show-russias-expanding-ukraine-buildup-11618917238>.

4 "Russian Army operates around 170 battalion tactical groups — defense chief," *TASS*, August 10, 2021, <https://tass.com/defense/1324461>.

5 Yuras Karmanau, "Ukraine says 2 soldiers killed in east amid Russia tensions," *Associated Press*, May 7, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-russia-europe-3f9f33dfafe0dbdef1beda466a514e5c>.

intentions, including fears of a large-scale ground invasion. However, U.S. intelligence indicated that a large-scale ground invasion was unlikely because of a lack of prepositioned spare parts, field hospitals, ammunition, and other logistics necessary for such an operation.⁶ Likewise, EUCOM commander General Tod Wolters said on April 15 that there was a “low to medium” risk of a Russian ground invasion of Ukraine in the coming weeks.⁷

On April 22, after the end of a large-scale exercise at the Opuk training area in Crimea, which included an amphibious landing, a helicopter air assault operation with two companies, and a multi-battalion airborne operation with more than two thousand paratroopers and sixty vehicles parachuted from forty Il-76MD transport aircraft, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that the winter verification tests for the Western and Southern Military Districts had been a success and the troops would return to their permanent bases.⁸ However, he indicated that equipment from Central Military District’s 41st Combined Arms Army, which included BM-27 Uragan multiple

launch rocket systems and Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile systems and other heavy equipment, would remain at the Pogonovo training area in Voronezh near Ukraine’s border until the Zapad 2021 strategic exercise in September.⁹ Furthermore, Shoigu did not state clearly whether all of the equipment and units deployed near Ukraine’s borders outside of Crimea would also return to their bases, nor how those units were employed during the snap inspection.

Two weeks after Shoigu’s announcement, U.S. defense officials said that Russia had removed only “a few thousand” troops and that there were approximately 80,000 servicemen near Ukraine’s borders, despite Shoigu’s order for most of those units to return to their permanent bases by May 1.¹⁰ Thus Russia can still escalate rapidly in Ukraine in the future, though the immediate threat of a serious escalation of fighting in the Donbas appears to have passed with Shoigu’s announcement.

6 Barbara Starr, Jennifer Hansler, and Oren Liebermann, “US and other NATO members pledge support to Ukraine while walking fine line with Russia,” *CNN*, April 14 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/14/politics/us-nato-ukraine-russia/index.html>.

7 John Grady, “EUCOM Commander: Russia Not Likely to Invade Ukraine Soon,” *USNI News*, April 15, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/04/15/eucom-commander-russia-not-likely-to-invade-ukraine-soon>.

8 “На учениях в Крыму десантировались более 2 тыс. военнослужащих ВДВ,” *Interfax*, April 22, 2021, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/762679>.

9 Andrey Arkadiev, “Войска, задействованные в учениях на юге РФ, вернутся в пункты постоянной дислокации до 1 мая,” *Zvezda*, April 22, 2021, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/20214221457-nl2NT.html>.

10 Helene Cooper and Julian E. Barnes, “80,000 Russian Troops Remain at Ukraine Border as U.S. and NATO Hold Exercises,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/05/us/politics/biden-putin-russia-ukraine.html#click=https://t.co/5wfrlh52T1>.



Explaining Russia's Actions

Before Shoigu's announcement, there were three explanations for Russia's actions. First, that these movements were purely part of a training exercise designed to test the Russian Armed Forces. Second, that they were the prelude to a significant military escalation that would involve sending Russian forces beyond the line of contact in the Donbas or Crimea. Third, that Russia was building up its forces near Ukraine for coercive or signaling purposes. A Russian signaling action could have had two main targets. First, it could have been aimed at Ukraine. In this case, the buildup may have been undertaken to strengthen Russia's deterrence capability against a potential Ukrainian offensive in Crimea and the Donbas by demonstrating Russia's ability to defend those regions and lending credibility that it would move to protect them. The actions could also have been part of a compellence campaign designed to change Ukraine's behavior. However, since Russia already had sufficient combat power permanently based near Ukraine's borders to defeat any potential Ukrainian offensive, the massing of forces in the region was likely not directed at Kyiv.

The second primary target of either a deterrence or compellence strategy

could have been the United States and NATO instead of Ukraine. Shoigu's announcement that troops would return to their permanent bases a week after President Biden called President Putin to request a summit led some analysts to argue that this was a successful attempt at compellence. But Russian officials never provided a single, clear demand from Washington, and we would have expected to see other actions as part of a compellence campaign, such as aggressive intercepts of American aircraft and ships in neutral waters or renewed fighting in Idlib province in Syria or Libya. Instead, it appears Putin accepted a "tactical victory" by agreeing to the summit with President Biden, but not that this was necessarily the aim of the buildup.¹¹ A better explanation is that the buildup was aimed at deterring future actions from NATO or the United States, such as a renewed push to allow Ukraine to join NATO, to continue to sell arms to Kyiv, or to apply new sanctions against Russia. This was a demonstration that Russia could respond asymmetrically to anti-Russian policies adopted by the US and NATO by employing military force against Ukraine.

¹¹ Henry Meyer and Irina Reznik, "Putin Is Keeping the West Guessing and That's Just Fine With Him," *Bloomberg*, April 24, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-04-24/putin-is-keeping-the-west-guessing-and-that-s-just-fine-with-him>.

Training Exercise

The Russian military often conducts large exercises, particularly at the end of the winter period when units are tested so that senior leaders can determine whether they can complete their assigned missions. Exercises in Crimea and near Ukraine's borders also are not abnormal. The region is a priority for the Russian military. The possibility that Kyiv could attempt to retake the Donbas or Crimea remains a serious threat and its deterrence is a critical mission for the Russian military. Befitting the level of threat and importance the Russian military attaches to this mission, the regions surrounding Ukraine, which fall under the responsibility of the Russian Western and Southern Military Districts and Black Sea Fleet, have all been priorities for new equipment and the formation of new units, including three motorized rifle divisions that were officially established in 2016 on paper. The Southern Military District is currently in the process of upgrading the 19th and 20th Motorized Rifle Brigades into divisions as well.¹² In addition, the Russian military often conducts snap inspections as a means for senior officers to determine the actual level of readiness

of Russian units. Quickly sending a significant number of military personnel and equipment via rail on short notice is a useful capability to test.

However, this buildup was atypical. Unlike normal exercises, an unusually large number of military units were involved, including units from different military districts that were deployed near Ukraine's borders. Most notably, the action included part of the Central Military District's 41st Combined Arms Army (elements of the 74th and 35th Motorized Rifle Brigades, 120th Artillery Brigade, 6th Tank Regiment, and 119th Missile Brigade) as well as units from the Russian Airborne Forces' (VDV) 76th Air Assault Division and 98th Airborne Division, based more than 400 miles from Ukraine's borders.¹³ This is normal for the Russian military's annual strategic exercise—this year's exercise, Zapad 2021, will be held in the Western Military District in September—but uncommon for smaller training events.

Indeed, some of the units and systems that were transferred from the other military districts are army-level assets. In addition, the announcement of the exercise

12 Roman Krezul and Alexey Ramm, "А теперь «20-я»: легендарное гвардейское соединение вернется в строй," *Izvestia*, April 25, 2021, <https://iz.ru/1156655/roman-kretcul-aleksei-ramm/teper-20-ia-legendarnoe-gvardeiskoe-soedinenie-vernetsia-v-stroi>; "19-я мотострелковая дивизия Южного военного округа," *Altyn73*, December 28, 2020, <https://altyn73.livejournal.com/1443160.html>.

13 "Russian Ground Troop Units and Iskander ballistic missiles identified at Ukrainian border by Janes," *Janes*, April 8, 2021, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/russian-ground-troop-units-and-iskander-ballistic-missiles-identified-at-ukrainian-border-by-janes>.



Russian military combat readiness exercises on April 22, 2021 along the Ukrainian border. (mil.ru)

by Russia's Southern Military District commander, Army General Alexander Dvornikov, made no mention of units from other districts that would participate. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said on April 13 that Russia redeployed "two armies and three VDV units" to Russia's western borders, but only specified which units—and made the first public statement that units from the Central Military District were involved—after announcing the verification tests were over.¹⁴ The amount of military equipment moved by rail was so great that manufacturers of agricultural

machinery complained to government officials that the Russian military was disrupting their ability to supply domestic customers, though this also could be a result of the Russian MoD requisitioning these rail cars on short notice.¹⁵

The exercise was announced with little warning. The Russian MoD's leadership did not brief foreign defense attaches, as it normally does before large exercises in part to reduce foreign concerns. In addition, Russia is supposed to notify other Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) members

¹⁴ "Russia redeploys 2 armies, 3 airborne units to western border in view of NATO threat – Shoigu," *Interfax*, April 13, 2021, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/71572/>; Andrey Arkadiev, "Войска, задействованные в учениях на юге РФ, вернутся в пункты постоянной дислокации до 1 мая," *Zvezda*, April 22, 2021, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/20214221457-nl2NT.html>.

¹⁵ Olga Nikitina, Alexey Polukhin, and Natalia Skorlygina, "В России срывается тракторный завоз," *Kommersant*, March 29, 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4750465>.



Russian military combat readiness exercises on April 22, 2021 along the Ukrainian border. (mil.ru)

under the 2011 Vienna Document on Confidence and Security Building Measures anytime it conducts any kind of unusual military activity. Although Ukraine requested a meeting with Russia regarding these exercises, Russia declined to attend the meeting or provide further details, according to the United States Mission to the OSCE.¹⁶

The Southern Military District also conducted the most recent strategic annual exercise, Kavkaz 2020, in September, so of all of Russia's military districts, it should have been the least in need of conducting such a large exercise on short notice. The Russian military

provided few details about the buildup even though the movement of military equipment was very visible for weeks and included several army-level and division-level assets and other very capable systems. All these factors suggest that these movements were for more than just an exercise. They were intended to send a signal.

¹⁶ "Meeting Requested by Ukraine under Vienna Document Chapter III Regarding Unusual Russian Military Activity," U.S. Mission to the OSCE, April 10, 2021, <https://osce.usmission.gov/meeting-requested-by-ukraine-under-vienna-document-chapter-iii-regarding-unusual-russian-military-activity/>.

Ground Assault beyond Crimea and the Donbas

The most concerning possibility was that the buildup was preparation for a large-scale intervention by the Russian Armed Forces beyond the current line of control in the Donbas or Crimea, possibly with the aim of seizing more territory. Indeed, the specific military units and equipment that moved towards Ukraine's borders were the types we would expect to see in a Russian ground assault. These included heavy artillery, such as 2S7M Malka 203mm self-propelled guns, 2S4 Tyulpan 240mm mortars, and BM-27 Uragan 220mm multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS)—all of which are army- or district-level assets—as well as plenty of medium 152mm 2S3 Akatsiya, 2S19 Msta-S, and 2A65 Msta-B howitzers, and short-range TOS-1A thermobaric multiple launch rocket system (MLRS).

These MLRS and artillery pieces would be critical for suppressing or destroying Ukrainian fortified defenses or artillery in support of a Russian ground assault. The heavy 2S7M, 2S4, and TOS-1A are particularly effective at penetrating well-fortified defensive positions that medium

and light artillery cannot destroy, and they are often used in training to support tank and motorized rifle units breaking through enemy defenses.¹⁷ In addition, T-72B3 tanks with mine rollers and plows, UR-77 mine-clearing systems, IMR-2M obstacle-clearing vehicles, and other engineering systems were spotted on the move near Ukraine. If Russia intended to conduct an armored assault through Ukrainian defenses, these are systems Russia would employ.

Observers also spotted Iskander-M short-range ballistic and cruise missile systems with an official maximum range of 500km (tests have demonstrated the actual range is greater than 650km), likely from the Central Military District's 119th Missile Brigade.¹⁸ The Southern and Western Military Districts already have a total of six Iskander-M brigades. Although the Ashuluk training area in Astrakhan is often used for live-fire exercises for long-range systems from other military districts, including the Iskander-M and S-400 air defense systems, these Iskander-M systems were never relocated

17 Alexey Ramm and Bogdan Stepovoy, "Система выжигания: в армии создадут батальоны тяжелых огнеметов," *Izvestia*, October 22, 2019, <https://iz.ru/928820/aleksei-ramm-bogdan-stepovoi/sistema-vyzhiganiia-v-armii-soz-dadut-batalony-tiazhelykh-ognemetov>; Evgeny Andreev, Bogdan Stepovoy, and Alexey Ramm, "Артиллерия наращивает мощь," *Izvestia*, December 17, 2017, <https://iz.ru/675176/evgenii-andreev-bogdan-stepovoi-aleksei-ramm/artilleriia-narashchivaet-moshch>.

18 "Russian Ground Troop Units and Iskander ballistic missiles identified at Ukrainian border by Janes," Janes, April 8, 2021, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/russian-ground-troop-units-and-iskander-ballistic-missiles-identified-at-ukrainian-border-by-janes>; "Баллистическая ракета комплекса "Искандер-М" упала в Казахстане, пролетев более 600 километров," *BMPD*, January 13, 2020, <https://bmpd.livejournal.com/3903873.html>.



Russian military combat readiness exercises on April 22, 2021 along the Ukrainian border. (mil.ru)

near Astrakhan, which indicates that their deployment near Ukraine's border was for other purposes. In addition, some of the Russian Ground Forces' best-equipped tank and motorized rifle formations, including those with T-72B3 and T-90A tanks and BMP-3 infantry fighting vehicles, were moved near the border; many are from the Southern Military District's 58th Combined Arms Army but were redeployed from the North Caucasus.¹⁹

Many of the units arriving also came from Russia's elite Airborne Forces (VDV),

including its 76th Guards Air Assault Division based in Pskov, whose forces took part in some of the heaviest fighting in the Donbas in August-September 2014. Much of the VDV equipment that arrived in Crimea was likely from the 56th Independent Air Assault Brigade based in Kamyshin, Volgograd, which Sergei Shoigu announced on March 25 would be restructured into a regiment as part of the 7th Mountain Air Assault Division. Its new permanent base is in Crimea where an independent air assault battalion was previously based.²⁰

19 "Мотострелковые соединения 58-й армии ЮВО переброшены на учения в Крым," *Interfax*, April 16, 2021, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/761607>.

20 "В Москве под руководством главы военного ведомства прошло заседание Коллегии Минобороны России," Russian Ministry of Defense, March 25, 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12350817@egNews.

These elite mechanized air assault, motorized rifle, and tank units arrived near Ukraine along with critical supporting assets, such as Infauna and Borisoglebsk-2 electronic warfare systems, as well as air defense systems, including the long-range S-300PM2 Favorit; medium-range Buk-M2 and Buk-M3 systems; and short-range Pantsir-S, Tunguska-M1, and Strela-10 systems. Many of these systems are designed to escort Russian maneuver units into battle and to provide protection from enemy aviation, UAVs, precision-guided munitions, and munitions from multiple launch rocket systems. Social media videos have also shown high-level communications and command and control units and equipment near the border, including the army-level P-260T Redut-2US digital communication system.²¹ A large-scale ground assault would require sophisticated command and control and communications capabilities like these. The deployment of so many high-level assets organic at the army or district level indicate that this was not a normal battalion- or brigade-level exercise.

Russia also redeployed a number of Southern Military District aviation units to Ukraine's borders, including fifty helicopters and combat aircraft to Crimea.²² This included Mi-28N, Mi-28UB, Ka-52, and Mi-8 helicopters—likely from the 55th and 487th Helicopter Regiments and 16th Army Aviation Brigade—and Su-30SM and Su-27 fighters, Su-24 and Su-34 bombers, and Su-25SM3 attack aircraft.²³ Russia's first operational unmanned combat aerial vehicle, the Orion or Inokhodets, took part in the deployment as well.²⁴

Unlike its ground assets, the Russian military did not need to redeploy many aircraft closer to Ukraine's borders because of their greater range. However, deploying its shortest-range aircraft, such as Su-25SM3 and helicopters, in Crimea provided the Russian military with greater options in a potential escalation with Ukraine. Russia had the lift capacity to transport multiple companies of soldiers via helicopter along Ukraine's southern coast if necessary. Russia also deployed an A-50U airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) aircraft based in Ivanovo

21 "Russian Ground Troop Units and Iskander ballistic missiles identified at Ukrainian border by Janes," Janes, April 8, 2021, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/russian-ground-troop-units-and-iskander-ballistic-missiles-identified-at-ukrainian-border-by-janes>.

22 "Over 20 Russian Black Sea Fleet warships hold joint drills with aircraft in Crimea," TASS, April 20, 2021, <https://tass.com/defense/1280235>.

23 Michael R. Gordon and Georgi Kantchev, "Satellite Images Show Russia's Expanding Ukraine Buildup," *Wall Street Journal*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/satellite-images-show-russias-expanding-ukraine-buildup-11618917238>.

24 Russian Ministry of Defense, "Министр обороны РФ Сергей Шойгу прибыл в Крым, где в четверг состоится основной этап межвидовых учений войск Южного военного округа и ВДВ, которые идут в рамках внезапной проверки боеготовности," VK, April 22, 2021, https://vk.com/mil?w=wall-133441491_420427.

that took part in the exercise in Crimea.²⁵ The Russian MoD claimed that all fifty of the aircraft deployed to Crimea had returned to their permanent bases by April 26.²⁶

Lastly, Russia deployed an abnormally large number of ships, particularly amphibious ships, to the region. This was likely the largest amphibious naval grouping in the Black Sea since the fall of the Soviet Union. The Caspian Flotilla sent fifteen ships, including three Project 1204 Shmel-class artillery boats and eight landing craft (including all six of its Serna-class landing craft), which entered the Black Sea on April 17. The Northern and Baltic Fleets each deployed two of their Project 775 Ropucha-class amphibious large landing ships, which crossed the Bosphorus into the Black Sea on April 17 as well. These are in addition to the Black Sea Fleet's seven Project 775 and Project 1171 amphibious ships and several landing craft, though one Ropucha-class landing ship departed the Black Sea for Syria during the buildup.

In mid-to-late-April, the Russian Navy had a total of eleven large landing ships (each capable of transporting a naval infantry company as well as tanks, artillery, and other armored vehicles); more than twelve Serna, Ondatra, BK-16, or BK-18

landing craft; and a variety of support ships in the Black Sea. Although they could likely only muster seven or eight large landing ships at the same time, Russia had the capacity to conduct an amphibious assault on Ukraine's coast with one reinforced naval infantry (or VDV) battalion with air defense, artillery, and other support elements without requiring the ships to make multiple trips. A second battalion could likely be landed within hours, and Russia could insert an air assault company—or a battalion, if additional aviation assets were moved to the region—by helicopter.

Because of the short distances, Russia could also conduct an independent helicopter assault or raid along Ukraine's coast even without an amphibious operation. A Russian amphibious assault on Ukraine's coast was a very unlikely possibility—amphibious operations are notoriously complex and difficult to execute—but the sheer amphibious capability meant that Ukraine could not ignore the possibility. Russia also had the capability to drop a VDV regiment by parachute, which it demonstrated during the exercise at the Opuk training area on April 22 by reportedly parachuting more than two thousand paratroopers and sixty BMD-2 and BTR-D armored vehicles from the VDV's 98th Guards Airborne Division

25 Thomas Bullock, "Russia continues to reinforce Ukrainian border, begins exercises in Black Sea," *Janes*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/russia-continues-to-reinforce-ukrainian-border-begins-exercises-in-black-sea>.

26 Anna Berestovaya, "Самолеты и вертолеты авиации ЮВО и Черноморского флота вернулись из Крыма," *Zvezda*, April 26, 2021, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/2021426326-5g925.html>.



from forty Il-76MD transport aircraft.²⁷

These forces were in addition to the Southern Military District and Black Sea Fleet's ample capabilities. The Southern Military District has long been a priority district for the Russian military, with a higher percentage of professional soldiers, permanent readiness units, and modern equipment than any other district. Upgrading the Black Sea Fleet, including its ground forces based in Crimea, has also been one the Russian Navy's priorities since the annexation in 2014.

As an example, Crimea is already well-defended with four S-400 air defense battalions, which have been on combat duty there since 2018, though S-300PM2 with Pantsir-S short-range air defense systems have also been spotted in videos near Ukraine's borders. In addition, the Black Sea Fleet has six submarines and seven surface ships that can carry long-range Kalibr cruise missiles, which rotate through deployments in the Mediterranean Sea. Between these Kalibr-equipped submarines and ships and the Iskander-M brigades, Russian military commanders near Ukraine's borders have a robust long-range precision-guided strike capability.

With its buildup in the Western and Southern Military Districts, Russia could conduct an armored offensive from

the Donbas, from Crimea, and from the Belgorod, Kursk, and Bryansk Oblasts on Ukraine's northeastern border. Russia could also conduct an amphibious assault along Ukraine's coast or a helicopter assault or airborne operation, possibly in support of a ground offensive. Ukrainian forces had to spread thin in response.

Nonetheless, a Russian military incursion beyond the line of contact was always unlikely for several reasons. First, the buildup was relatively slow but very public. Russia made little effort to hide the movement of its forces to Ukraine's borders. They could have placed tarps over the vehicles being transported via rail, moved them at night, and prevented Western reporters from getting close to their camps. Instead, the security situation in Ukraine, in particular the Donbas, was a focus for Russian officials and state-owned television networks during the buildup, forfeiting the element of surprise.²⁸

Operational security failures, particularly via social media, during the fighting in the Donbas in 2014-2015 led to a concerted effort by the Russian military to crack down on these mistakes. It seems unlikely that Western reporters could get so close to a Russian military camp, or that significant army-level military equipment would be moved in a way that they could be easily spotted and uploaded to social

27 Andrey Arkadiev, "Тысячи бойцов, десятки единиц техники: опубликованы кадры массового десантирования из Ил-76 в Крыму," *Zvezda*, April 22, 2021, <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/20214221822-Td0s1.html>.

28 Diana Magnay, "Russia: Inside the Kremlin's Military Buildup Along the Ukraine Border," *Sky News*, April 12, 2021, <https://news.sky.com/story/russia-inside-the-kremlins-military-build-up-along-the-ukraine-border-12272418>



Russian Black Sea Fleet ships in Russian-occupied Crimea in May 2015. (Vadim Indeikin/Wikimedia)

media, unless this was intentional.²⁹ This gave Ukraine time to call up its reserves, move reinforcements, and transfer equipment—possibly including American Javelin anti-tank guided missiles, which are currently spread out across the country in storage facilities—to units near the line of contact.³⁰ Moreover, the buildup has relied heavily on rail, with no public indication that Russia's military transport aviation has played a large role in moving this equipment. Air transport would normally be used if Russia needed to quickly mass its forces, and it would be a better option for operational

security purposes. This indicates that this movement of equipment was designed more to send a signal than in preparation of a military offensive.

Second, there is not an objective sufficiently important that it would necessitate a ground assault and the associated repercussions. Despite op-eds published each year arguing that Russia has tried to seize more Ukrainian territory, such as by creating a “land bridge” to Crimea from the Donbas—the completion of the Crimean Bridge in 2019 between Crimea and the Russian

29 Diana Magnay, “Russia: Inside the Kremlin’s military build-up along the Ukraine border,” *Sky News*, April 12, 2021, <https://news.sky.com/story/russia-inside-the-kremlins-military-build-up-along-the-ukraine-border-12272418>.

30 Lara Seligman and Natasha Bertrand, “Can Ukraine deploy U.S.-made weapons against the Russians?” *Politico*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/04/12/ukraine-us-missile-weapons-russia-480985>.



Secretary Antony J. Blinken And Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba meet in Washington D.C., August 2021.
(U.S. Embassy in Ukraine)

mainland solved this issue—there is little evidence that Russia has ever sought this. Indeed, controlling a narrow strip of land on the coast would leave it vulnerable to a Ukrainian offensive that could cut off Russian lines of communication, and it would require more Russian forces to defend. In addition, Russian forces could have taken more territory in 2015.

Instead, Russian policy to Ukraine since 2014 has largely focused on retaining and defending the territories it has seized and implementing the Minsk accords to its advantage. A full-fledged ground invasion could potentially threaten the Nord Stream II pipeline between Russia and Germany, and it would likely unite NATO, possibly

even leading Sweden or Finland to join the alliance. It would also spark additional sanctions from the United States and the European Union. A further collapse of relations with the U.S. and EU could make Russia more dependent on China for trade and economic cooperation.

The one part of Ukraine that has been mentioned as a potential target for a Russian invasion is the Northern Crimean Canal. Crimea is facing a water shortage, in part caused by Ukraine's decision to block the canal that takes water from the Dnieper River to Crimea. This shortage has led parts of Crimea to ration water use and has significantly reduced the amount of arable land in Crimea, harming

its agriculture. Some analysts have suggested that Russia could seize the canal and the area around it to secure Crimea's water supply. Instead, Russia is currently implementing a 50-billion-ruble plan to ameliorate the situation by repairing pipes, digging new wells, and other measures that are supposed to double Crime's water supply by 2024.³¹

Securing the canal would complicate Russia's security situation in Ukraine, as its current border in Crimea is mostly separated by water. This would likely require more troops to be stationed there permanently; there would also not be the patina, however tenuous, that this was led by Ukrainians since this operation would originate from Crimea, not the Donbas. There is also no guarantee that the canal could simply be turned on quickly, as it does not appear to have been well maintained. Any military operation involves significant, unknown risks, and an invasion to seize the canal and its surrounding would almost certainly be far more expensive than the alternative efforts to solve Crimea's water problems.

Finally, if Russia was looking for a pretext for a military operation, it already had one. A five-year old child was tragically killed in an explosion in the village of Oleksandrivske in the self-proclaimed breakaway Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) on April 3. Russian state-controlled news outlets like *Pervy Kanal* reported that the child was killed by a Ukrainian drone strike. Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that it would be difficult to believe that this was not true.³² However, Ukraine's defense ministry called the allegation "fake news" and the independent Russian news site *Telekanal Dozhd* reported that his death was not caused by a drone strike, but instead likely from picking up an explosive device.³³ Regardless, if Russia had wanted to mount a large offensive operation in the Donbas, this could have been used as pretext.

31 Anton Troianovski, "Where Ukrainians Are Preparing for All-Out War With Russia," *New York Times*, May 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/08/world/europe/ukraine-russia-canal-crimea.html>; Clara Ferreira Marques, "Crimea's Water Crisis Is an Impossible Problem for Putin," *Bloomberg*, March 19, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-03-19/russia-vs-ukraine-crimea-s-water-crisis-is-an-impossible-problem-for-putin>; Nikolay Pozdnyakov Lyubov Lezhneva, "Крымский рост: как Россия продолжит развивать полуостров," *Izvestia*, March 18, 2021, <https://iz.ru/1139131/nikolai-pozdniakov-liubov-lezhneva/krymskii-rost-kak-rossiia-prodolzhit-razvivat-poluostrov>.

32 "В Донецке в результате атаки украинского беспилотника погиб ребенок," *Pervyy kanal*, April 2, 2021, https://yandex.ru/turbo/1tv.ru/s/news/2021-04-03/404242-v_donetske_v_rezultate_ataki_ukrainskogo_bespilotnika_pogib_rebenok; "Russia to investigate reported killing of child in Ukraine attack," *Al Jazeera*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/5/russia-to-investigate-reported-killing-of-child-in-ukraine-attack>.

33 "Убитый мальчик в Донбассе: что правда, а что ложь в истории, подхваченной российской пропагандой," *Telekanal Dozhd*, April 6, 2021, https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/vechernee_shou/donbas-527651/;

Deterrence or Compellence?

The public and slow buildup of combat power near Ukraine's borders instead appears to be largely demonstrative in nature. Russia has deliberately left its intentions ambiguous. The Russian MoD's leadership could have provided details of the movement of units and timeline of the declared exercises as confidence-building measures, but chose to only provide certain details at the end of the buildup, without a full explanation as to why these actions were necessary.

Two weeks after Shoigu's announcement that the units would move back to their permanent bases, U.S. defense officials and Ukrainian President Zelensky both said that only a few thousand had departed, leaving approximately 75,000 troops near Ukraine's borders, according to Zelensky.³⁴ The head of Ukraine's state security service, Ivan Bakanov, gave an even higher figure, estimating that 100,000 Russian troops were still deployed near Ukraine.³⁵ The same is true for the amphibious ships from the Caspian Flotilla, Northern Fleet, and Baltic Fleet, which all appear to be still located in Sevastopol or the Black Sea. Therefore, Russia still retains the capacity to use military force in Ukraine on short notice.

Rather than preparing for a potential invasion, there are two better explanations for why Russia massed combat power near Ukraine's borders: deterrence and compellence. Deterrence and compellence both involve threats, typically connected to military force, intended to influence another country's decision-making through coercion. Deterrence is designed to dissuade the target from taking a future action, whereas compellence threatens force unless the target changes its current behavior.

If Ukraine was the target, then Russia's actions could have been aimed at retaining deterrence vis-à-vis Ukraine in case Kyiv used military force to retake Crimea or the Donbas. Otherwise, the buildup could have been part of a compellence strategy designed to force Ukraine to make a concession or change its behavior.

The local balance of combat power and the credibility of the threat are both critical to the strength of deterrence and compellence strategies. In the case of Crimea and the Donbas, there is little doubt that Russia has the military capability to prevent Ukraine from retaking either region by force, given that Russia has a stronger military, both in general and in

34 "President Zelensky says there are still 75,000 Russian troops on the border with Ukraine," *Meduza*, May 6, 2021, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2021/05/06/president-zelensky-says-there-s-still-75-000-russian-troops-on-the-border-with-ukraine>.

35 "Ukraine says Russia still has 100,000 troops near its border," *Reuters*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-says-russia-still-has-100000-troops-near-its-border-2021-05-11/>.



the region. In addition, Russia has made it clear it would defend both regions. Vladimir Putin has demonstrated during his two decades in power that he is not afraid to use military force.

Perceptions are ultimately more important in deterrence, even if they are incorrect. Many Russian sources argued the buildup was a response to Ukraine having strengthened its forces near the Donbas, which a number of Russian analysts claimed could be preparation for an impending offensive.³⁶ The Ukrainian military has also become a much more effective fighting force since 2015, with improved training and purchases of modern military equipment, most notably Turkish TB2 unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAV) that played a critical role in fighting in Idlib, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh last year.³⁷

In addition, Russia's leadership may be concerned that Ukraine feels emboldened with a new and more supportive administration in Washington, though Ukrainian officials, including the Ukrainian Armed Forces Commander-in-Chief, Colonel-General Ruslan Khomchak,

have denied they are planning to retake the Donbas.³⁸ Khomchak went further, saying there is no "purely military solution" to the Donbas situation.³⁹ Even though a Ukrainian offensive is highly unlikely, some Russian analysts believe that Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky may try to retake the Donbas to improve his popularity at home or to win support from NATO.⁴⁰

By building up its forces near Ukraine, Russia strengthens its deterrence in several ways. It demonstrates Russia can reinforce Crimea and the Donbas with substantial combat power if fighting escalates. It also shows that Russia retains escalation dominance, as Russia can bring a greater quantity and quality of forces and equipment to bear, regardless of further Ukrainian arms imports. Lastly, it is a demonstration of resolve. Russia is signaling to Kyiv, as well as Washington and NATO, that it will defend the Donbas and Crimea even at the cost of a further deterioration in relations with the West.

Statements from Russian officials during the buildup also indicated that deterrence concerns may have driven

36 Ruslan Pukhov interview with Nikolay Nelyubin, "«Вероятность начала большой войны и русской масштабной интервенции на Украину пока что низкая»,» *Fontanka*, April 7, 2021, <https://www.fontanka.ru/2021/04/07/69852671/?fbclid=IwAR1E3FZTQsnrVYRvszKirljnK2e1tvwt5vv8euLaf4sRSprNHOQH4FZLkyA>.

37 "«Скоро начнется»: зачем украинцы резко нарастили силы в Донбассе," *RIA Novosti*, April 12, 2021, <https://ria.ru/20201204/donbass-1587543617.html>.

38 General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, "The reports spread by the aggressor state by the Russian Federation about the alleged "preparation of Ukraine for the attack on Donbas" are not true and are in the nature of a targeted disinformation campaign," *Facebook*, April 9, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/1893527870816461>.

39 "Главком ВСУ оценил шансы вернуть Донбасс военным путем," *RIA Novosti*, December, 27, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20201127/donbass-1586543642.html>.

40 "Политолог назвал 6 целей Зеленского в войне на Донбассе," *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, April 8, 2021, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2021/04/08/politolog-nazval-6-celey-zelenskogo-v-voyne-na-donbasse.html>.



DPR military parade in Donetsk, May 2018. (Andrew Butko/Wikimedia)

the buildup. They offered three aims for this deterrence. During an inspection of the Northern Fleet, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said that NATO is building up its forces and military infrastructure in the Arctic, Baltic region, and the Black Sea area and that the intensity of air and naval reconnaissance near Russia's borders has increased. He accused NATO of holding forty exercises a year in Europe with a "clear anti-Russian bias." Shoigu mentioned the upcoming NATO Defender Europe 2021 exercise and said

Russia had taken "appropriate measures" in response to this NATO buildup before mentioning the forces being deployed to its western borders near Ukraine.⁴¹ Shoigu indicated Russia was responding primarily to the NATO Defender Europe exercise and not Ukraine's actions.

Second, Dmitry Kozak, the deputy head of Russia's presidential administration, indicated that Russia's actions were in response to the threat of an offensive by Ukraine. He said renewed fighting

⁴¹ "Министр обороны России генерал армии Сергей Шойгу в ходе поездки на Северный флот провел рабочее совещание в Североморске," Russian Ministry of Defense, April 13, 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12354311@egNews.

could mark the “beginning of the end” for Ukraine if it escalated sufficiently.⁴² Although Shoigu on April 13 said verification checks should be completed in two weeks, Vladimir Shamanov, the Chairman of the Duma’s Defense Committee and the former commander of Russia’s Airborne Troops, said that the return of these mobilized units to their permanent bases after the exercise would depend on the situation on the other side of their border with Ukraine, which also appears to support the argument that this was to deter a Ukrainian offensive.⁴³ Additionally, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov emphasized Russia will continue to defend Russian-speakers in the Donbas.⁴⁴

The third rationale was provided by Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, who criticized Ukraine for building up its forces near the Donbas and not implementing the Minsk accords. In particular, she warned Ukraine against joining NATO, which would “lead to a large-scale rise in tensions in the southeast, possibly causing irreversible consequences for Ukraine’s statehood.”⁴⁵

This ambiguity about what specific Ukrainian or NATO action, or possible future action, drove Russia’s response,

made it difficult to interpret Russia’s actions during the buildup. One of the rationales for the buildup was that it was in response to Ukraine’s actions; another, in response to NATO’s actions; and the third, in response to both Ukraine and NATO’s actions.

The buildup may also have been intended as compellence. In contrast to deterrence, compellence is the threat or use of force to compel a target to change its current behavior. Compellence seeks to alter the status quo while deterrence aims to maintain it. If the target does not change its actions or make concessions, the country employing compellence will use force to punish the recipient until it does, which could require a cycle of escalating violence. The point of compellence is not the use of military force itself, but simply to alter the target’s behavior. Ideally, the compeller’s goals are achieved without having to use force. As with deterrence, military capabilities and credibility are important in attempts at compellence. The capacity to inflict pain on the target needs to be real, as does the credibility to employ it if the demands are not met. This often involves a shorter timeline than deterrence and requires the compeller to go through with its threat if the target does not change its behavior. Compellence

42 “Ukraine conflict: Moscow could ‘defend’ Russia-backed rebels,” *BBC*, April 9, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56678665>.

43 “Возвращение войск РФ с юга страны будет зависеть от ситуации по ту сторону границы - Шаманов “Интерфаксу,”” *Interfax*, April 13, 2021, <https://www.militarynews.ru/story.asp?rid=1&nid=548344&lang=RU>.

44 Daryna Krasnolutska, “Ukraine Tells Russia to Pull Back Troops as U.S. Warns of Costs,” *Bloomberg*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-04-12/ukraine-tells-russia-to-pull-back-troops-as-u-s-warns-of-costs>.

45 “Ukraine’s NATO accession would lead to large-scale rise in tensions — Russian diplomat,” *TASS*, April 9, 2021, <https://tass.com/politics/1275949>.



NATO ships exercise in the Black Sea, July 2021. (NATO)

aims to alter another country's incentive structure and make complying with the compeller's demands the preferable course of action.

The problem is that it can be difficult to determine whether a country is focused on deterrence or compellence, particularly with the multiple demands and justifications mentioned by Russian officials. Most weapon systems are not purely offensive or defensive, but instead can be employed in multiple roles. As an example, tank units are effective at leading an offensive, but they are also critical in a defensive role to reinforce defensive positions and counterattacks. The same is true for artillery and MLRS. Thus, attempting to interpret the purpose

of a military buildup by looking at the equipment alone will not necessarily provide a clear picture. Indeed, a country attempting to compel its neighbor might want a buildup to look exactly like the preparation for a large-scale ground offensive in order for the threat to be greatest

The buildup of forces around Ukraine could have been part of a compellence strategy against Ukraine from Russia. Latent combat power could inflict substantial pain on Ukraine. Since Russia's intentions are not fully known, Ukraine must consider the worst-case scenario as a possibility. If Kyiv believes a renewed ground invasion or use of heavy military force is possible, even if unlikely, it may

decide that making a small concession would be preferable to forestall such a possibility. If Russia's actions were aimed at compellence, Kyiv would need to take some action to satisfy Russia's demands, otherwise Moscow could use force to demonstrate its resolve and alter Ukraine's cost-benefit analysis.

As an example, if Russia is determined to resolve the water supply problem in Crimea, it does not necessarily need to seize the canal. A cheaper option would be to use threats or limited military force to compel Ukraine to open the canal once again without occupying the entire area. That force needs to be sufficiently painful and the threat of future punishment sufficiently credible to alter Kyiv's cost-benefit analysis. To achieve this, Russia could have taken limited escalatory steps as part of a compellence campaign against Ukraine. Russian air defenses could have shot down a Ukrainian TB2 UCAV, which are increasingly flying closer to Crimea and the Donbas. This might be preferable, as it would not cost any Ukrainian lives, but it would still demonstrate that Turkish TB2 would have far less success operating against Russia, which has a very capable integrated air defense system, unlike Armenia or Syria.

Russia could also have deployed more sniper or anti-tank guided missile teams from its special operations forces to target Ukrainian servicemen along the line of contact more aggressively. Last May, the Ukrainian military published

helmet-cam footage that appears to be of a well-equipped Russian sniper team from the FSB's Special Purpose Center operating along the front lines in the Donbas. Ukraine alleged that that footage was taken on the same day a Ukrainian serviceman was killed by sniper fire.⁴⁶ Using snipers or ATGM teams has the advantage of appearing to be part of the normal fighting along the line-of-contact and is thus more easily deniable.

In addition, Russia could have escalated with greater artillery or MLRS fire than normal along the line-of-contact. This could involve using artillery already based in the Donbas, or escalation with heavy Russian artillery, such as the 2S7M Malka, 2S4 Tyulpan, or TOS-1A MLRS systems. But employing these systems would be less deniable since they are not in service with the Russian-backed separatist groups in the Donbas. Russia could use them in a limited role or attempt to destroy Ukrainian artillery, armor, or defenses to demonstrate how painful a further escalation would be. A heavy bombardment on a narrow part of the front would show Kyiv that Ukraine would struggle to prevent an armored breakthrough after a further artillery barrage. A less likely possibility is that Russia could have launched a short-range ballistic or cruise missile from an Iskander-M system.

All these options would be designed to coerce Ukraine into changing its behavior with the threat of future punitive actions.

⁴⁶ Ray Furlong, "Video Purportedly Shows Russian Snipers In Ukraine," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/video-purportedly-shows-russian-snipers-in-ukraine/30624198.html>.



President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky visits the Mykolaiv and Odesa regions. (Office of the President of Ukraine)

Indeed, Russia has already demonstrated some possibly compellent behavior by limiting access through the Kerch Strait and detaining a Ukrainian diplomat, allegedly for receiving classified information.⁴⁷ Other potential compellent actions could involve Russia initiating another naval altercation with Ukrainian ships, as with the 2018 Kerch Strait incident, or conducting unsafe intercepts of Ukrainian or NATO aircraft in the Black Sea. Russia could also escalate its use of cyberwarfare or employ electronic warfare as part of a compellence campaign.

What is not fully clear is what Russia was demanding from Ukraine if this was an attempt at compellence. In addition to Crimea's water situation, analysts have speculated that Russia wants the Ukrainian government to: implement the Minsk agreement; remove sanctions on Ukrainian oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, a close associate of Vladimir Putin; reopen three pro-Russia domestic television channels associated with Medvedchuk; halt or reduce Ukrainian forces reinforcements near the Donbas; and deescalate rhetoric about the Donbas.⁴⁸

47 Jeff Seldin, "US, NATO Slam Russian Plan to Block Parts of Black Sea," April 16, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/us-nato-slam-russian-plan-block-parts-black-sea>.

48 Roman Olearchyk, "Ukraine imposes sanctions on Putin ally Viktor Medvedchuk," *Financial Times*, February 19, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/5acf9374-bed9-4f2b-99e2-5965764ffd0e>; Maxim Samorukov, "Are Russia and Ukraine Sliding Into War?" *Carnegie Moscow Center*, April 5, 2021, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/84250>



Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby holds a press briefing discussing Russian military buildup near Ukraine on April 9, 2021. (defense.gov)

But Russia did not make a clear public demand with a deadline tied to compellent actions or threats. Of course, Moscow could be communicating privately with Kyiv about its demands while signaling publicly, but there is no evidence of this. Another possibility is that Russia was trying to change Washington's behavior by threatening an outbreak of fighting in Ukraine—which would require the U.S.'s attention—or seeking to demonstrate that further arms sales and other support to Ukraine could lead to a new, dangerous conflict.

Further muddying Russia's intentions, some of the arguments from Russian officials could be interpreted as compellence demands rather than

deterrence signaling. Shamanov's statement that the return of Russian forces from the border would depend on the situation in Ukraine could be driven by either compellence or deterrence.⁴⁹ Likewise, Shoigu's statement that the Russian buildup was in response to NATO activities and the Defender Europe exercise could also be a compellent demand designed to coerce NATO from conducting similar large-scale exercises near Russia in the future. If this interpretation is correct, we could see an increase in unsafe and unprofessional intercepts and encounters between NATO and Russian aircraft and ships, especially in the Black Sea

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⁴⁹ "Возвращение войск РФ с юга страны будет зависеть от ситуации по ту сторону границы - Шаманов «Интерфаксу,»» *Interfax*, April 13, 2021, <https://www.militarynews.ru/story.asp?rid=1&nid=548344&lang=RU>.

Indeed, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov warned the U.S. against sending warships into the Black Sea for “their own good” and suggested that there was a high risk of an unspecified incident occurring at sea if those ships entered the Black Sea.⁵⁰ Perhaps this was meant to only deter the United States from sending ships into the Black Sea during the Russian buildup. But it also could be part of a broader campaign by Russian officials to compel US and NATO forces to not operate near Russia’s borders over the medium to long term. Ryabkov also called the United States an “adversary” during that meeting with reporters, which was a more negative description than normal. This could lead to further confrontations between American and Russian troops in northeastern Syria, where there were several dangerous encounters last year, including one altercation in August that injured several American servicemembers.⁵¹

More than three months since Russia began a limited withdrawal of forces from Ukraine’s borders, it seems clear that Ukraine was not the primary target of Russia’s buildup. Although there has been an escalation in fighting along the line of contact in 2021, there is no clear indication this increased shelling was intended to compel Ukraine. Since Ukraine has not made any clear concessions or noticeably

changed its behavior, we would have expected to see Russia escalate and employ military force if this was part of a campaign to compel Kyiv. Instead, Russia decided to pull back some of its forces and scale back its rhetoric. Likewise, deterring Ukraine from retaking Crimea or the Donbas also appears to be an unlikely explanation for Russia’s actions. Russia already had sufficient military capabilities in the region to prevent Ukraine from retaking Crimea or the Donbas before the buildup, and a Ukrainian offensive never seemed imminent.

A better explanation is that the United States and NATO were the primary target of the Russian buildup, which was designed to deter them from taking future actions that Moscow might perceive as “anti-Russian.” Moscow was demonstrating that it could militarily escalate in Ukraine to put pressure on the U.S. and NATO if they adopted policies that were against Russian interests. President Putin provided some clues about Russia’s intentions during his annual address to the Russian Federal Assembly the day before Shoigu announced the end of the certification checks. Putin stated, “if someone mistakes our good intentions for indifference or weakness and intends to burn or even blow up these bridges, they must know that Russia’s response will be asymmetrical, swift and tough.” This

50 Andrew Osborn and Alexander Marrow, “Russia calls US an adversary, warns its warships to avoid Crimea,” *Reuters*, April 13, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/instant-article/idINKBN2C00WD>.

51 Lara Seligman and Betsy Woodruff Swan, “U.S. service members injured in Syria after skirmish with Russian forces,” *Politico*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/26/us-troops-injured-russian-forces-syria-402347>.

clearly referred to the United States.⁵² He further warned against crossing Russia's "red lines."

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov clarified that "Russia's red lines are related to its national interests, they are also certainly related to bilateral relations with other nations, including Ukraine, and relations with different international alliances."⁵³ He added that potential meddling in Russia's political processes and infringement on Russia's economic interests could also violate these red lines.⁵⁴ In his speech, Putin also criticized the use of "politically motivated, illegal economic sanctions," the West's refusal "to establish an international dialogue on information and cyber security," "unfriendly moves towards Russia," and what he alleged was an attempted coup in Belarus.⁵⁵

Although most of Putin's speech was focused on domestic topics, the portion that covered foreign policy and national security was primarily directed at the United States and NATO, with only a passing mention of Ukraine. The language was couched in deterrent terms, warning of a strong response if unnamed countries crossed Russia's red lines, which he left unspecified and ambiguous. Given the backdrop of the buildup, Putin's threat to

respond asymmetrically to any violation of red lines suggested that Russia could use military force against Ukraine in response to U.S. or NATO actions. Because he left the exact red lines vague, this could mean Russia would use force against Ukraine in response to further sanctions from the U.S. and EU, stronger rhetoric, further military reinforcements near Russia, or any perceived meddling in domestic Russian affairs of those of Russia's neighbors.

The day after Putin's speech, former President Dmitry Medvedev, the current deputy chair of Russia's Security Council, published an op-ed titled "Unlearned History Lessons." The article described the lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis, which he compared to the current confrontation between Russia and the United States. Medvedev argued that the Soviet Union deployed missiles to Cuba in response to the U.S.'s deployment of missiles to Turkey, South Vietnam, and Lebanon. He equated those actions to today's "orchestrated harassment campaign against Russia," which includes "anti-Russian sanctions," the U.S.'s policy toward Russia's neighbors, NATO's "approach" to Russia's borders, opposition to Nord Stream 2, concerns about Russia's development of the Northern Sea Route, and Ukraine.

52 Vladimir Putin, "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," April 21, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65418>.

53 "Kremlin Explains Russia's 'Red Lines' Are Related to National Interests," *Sputnik*, April 22, 2021, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/202104221082699416-kremlin-explains-russias-red-lines-are-related-to-national-interests/>.

54 "'Red lines' for Russia infringing on its interests and attempts of meddling, says Kremlin," *TASS*, April 21, 2021, <https://tass.com/politics/1281169>.

55 Vladimir Putin, "Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly," April 21, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65418>.



President Vladimir Putin of Russia addresses the Federal Assembly, April 2021. (kremlin.ru)

Regarding the Soviet Union's deployment of missiles to Cuba, Medvedev said, "above all, it was a demonstration" and emphasized that the crisis was resolved because both sides were willing to compromise and make concessions. He also accused the Biden administration of escalating the situation by signaling a need for dialogue with Russia while simultaneously adopting anti-Russian policies, such as new sanctions, the expulsion of Russian diplomats, and mentioning the "Russian threat" in an executive order. He argued that compromise was possible during the Cuban Missile Crisis because the "United States perceived the Soviet Union as an equal opponent" and accused the Biden

administration of not recognizing that Russia has a comparable "military-political capacity" to the United States.⁵⁶

Medvedev concluded that the best way to avoid a Cuban Missile Crisis scenario today is by maintaining a dialogue, understanding each other's views, possessing a willingness to make compromises, and refraining from strong rhetoric or ultimatums. As with Putin's comments, Medvedev's op-ed made clear that Russia's leadership finds the Biden administration's policies unacceptable and escalatory with the implicit threat that Russia would respond if they continued or escalated, which could lead to a crisis. Medvedev's op-ed also indicates that Russia's buildup near Ukraine was

⁵⁶ Dmitry Medvedev, "Unlearned History Lessons," *Sputnik*, April 23, 2021, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/202104231082704184-unlearned-history-lessons/>.



Russian military combat readiness exercises on April 22, 2021 along the Ukrainian border. (mil.ru)

a demonstration directed at the U.S. in response to perceived anti-Russian policies taken by the Biden administration, including the expulsion of Russian diplomats, sanctions, and President Biden's statement that "Russia would pay a price" for election interference.⁵⁷

The buildup of Russian forces near Ukraine also was intended to demonstrate Russian military power and to show it could use military force in response to American policies against Russian interests.⁵⁸ Taken together, Putin's speech

and Medvedev's op-ed suggest that Russia's military buildup near Ukraine was primarily directed at the U.S. and was in response to measures taken by the Biden administration that they considered anti-Russian and escalatory.

The other plausible explanation for the buildup is that Russia was attempting to compel the United States or NATO. Bloomberg reported on April 24 that the Kremlin viewed the summit offer from President Biden as a "tactical victory" that forced the Biden administration to engage

57 "Biden vows Russia's Putin will 'pay a price' for election meddling," Reuters, March 17, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-cyber/biden-vows-russias-putin-will-pay-a-price-for-election-meddling-idUSKBN2B91JO>.

58 Dmitry Medvedev, "Unlearned History Lessons," Sputnik, April 23, 2021, <https://sputniknews.com/columnists/202104231082704184-unlearned-history-lessons/>.

with Moscow instead of placing Russian concerns on the backburner.⁵⁹ Likewise, some critics argued that the Biden administration was rewarding Russia for its bad behavior and that a summit would reinforce Russia's self-perception that it was a great power. However, we would have expected to see other measures taken if this was a compellence campaign.

First, the public rhetoric from Russian officials during the buildup painted a series of different demands and complaints against different actors. A compellence strategy typically involves clear demands with a specific timeline for the threat to work effectively. Second, the lack of other public actions taken by Russia against US or NATO interests during the buildup indicates that this likely was not about compellence. There were no reported unprofessional or aggressive intercepts of NATO aircraft or ships during this period, which have occurred on several occasions over the past few years, and no indication of serious altercations between Russian and American troops in northeastern Syria as occurred in August 2020. In addition, there did not appear to be any significant cyber attacks on the US during the buildup, though there were a number of damaging ransomware attacks on American companies in May and June

by Russia-based hacking groups after Shoigu's announcement that Russian troops would return to their bases. Russia also could have chosen to escalate the fighting in Libya or in the northern Syrian province of Idlib to put greater pressure on NATO but neither happened. Furthermore, the Biden administration announced new sanctions against Russia and expelled ten Russian officials from its embassy in Washington two days after President Biden offered a summit with Putin, yet Russia still decided to pull back some of its troops and scale back its rhetoric.⁶⁰ If Russia had been pursuing a compellence strategy, we would have expected to see an escalation in response to this "aggressive behavior," as Maria Zakharova called the new sanctions and expulsions.⁶¹

A better explanation is that the buildup was designed to deter the U.S. and NATO from crossing Russia's red lines with a clear threat that Russia could respond by escalating the conflict in Ukraine. Ukraine is not the only place where Russia could push back against U.S. interests, but it was likely one area where the new presidential administration in Washington was not anticipating a potential crisis. Russia's movement of forces also occurred before the NATO summit in June and offered

59 Henry Meyer and Irina Reznik, "Putin Is Keeping the West Guessing and That's Just Fine With Him," *Bloomberg*, April 24, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-04-24/putin-is-keeping-the-west-guessing-and-that-s-just-fine-with-him>.

60 Eric Tucker and Aamer Madhani, "US expels Russian diplomats, imposes sanctions for hacking," *Associated Press*, April 15, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/us-expel-russia-diplomats-sanctions-6a8a54c7932ee8cbe51b0ce505121995>.

61 Ilya Tsukanov, "Moscow Warns of 'Consequences' as US Slaps New Sanctions on Russia Targeting Debt, Expels Diplomats," *Sputnik News*, April 15, 2021, <https://sputniknews.com/world/202104151082638672-us-slaps-new-sanctions-on-russia-expels-diplomats/>.



U.S. President Joe Biden meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Geneva, June 2021. (Kremlin.ru)

a warning that Moscow would respond if Kyiv was offered an expedited path to NATO membership. Thus, Defense Minister Shoigu's announcement that some Russian reinforcements would leave Ukraine's borders on April 22 likely would have occurred even if President Biden did not offer President Putin a summit, since the buildup still achieved its aim. The summit offer was an additional benefit and one that President Putin opportunistically accepted. If the summit had been the ultimate goal of Russia's buildup, Moscow likely would have removed more of its forces from the Ukraine's border once the summit was finalized. Instead, many of those forces remain as a deterrent.

Finally, it is worth considering counterfactuals. Why did Russia rely on a military buildup instead of other tools of statecraft? Russia could have employed cyber tools as part of deterrence or compellence strategy. Indeed, *U.S. News & World Report* reported that the Ukrainian Security Service with the aid of the United States intelligence services prevented 350 cyberattacks starting in January through the end of March, which was a significant increase from the reported 600 that occurred in all of 2020.⁶² The report did not provide details about the attacks other than noting that Ukrainian government officials had been targeted through spear phishing

⁶² Paul D. Shinkman, "Russia Ramps Up Cyberattacks in Ukraine Amid Fears of War," *U.S. News & World Report*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2021-04-20/us-helping-ukraine-foil-russian-cyberattacks-as-hacking-spikes-sources>.

attacks. We also do not know how many of these cyber activities were focused on espionage as opposed to damaging Ukrainian systems or how critical the targets were. Russia could demonstrate that it could compromise strategically important infrastructure facilities like power plants to deter future Ukrainian actions,, or it could use cyber weapons as part of a compellence campaign by sabotaging or interfering with Ukrainian infrastructure. The lack of details in the report makes it difficult to assess how serious these cyber actions were and what their ultimate purpose was.

One possible reason why Russia has chosen to rely on the threat of military force instead is that it likely sends a stronger signal to the U.S. and NATO. Offensive cyber actions in Ukraine certainly could be painful, but cyber activities designed to deter would not necessarily be publicly recognized. Depending on the severity of the attacks, the use of cyber as part of a compellence campaign likely would not be as concerning to the U.S. and NATO, though a more severe attack could lead to a U.S. cyber retaliation. In contrast, renewed fighting in Europe would place significant pressure on Washington and European leaders.

Russia's military show of force was very public and could achieve Russia's goals

without necessarily requiring escalation. Many of Russia's foreign policy tools, such as economic statecraft, are comparatively weak, which is why Moscow increasingly relies on its military, one of its most capable tools. As Ruslan Pukov, the director of the Russian Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies think tank, stated, "we have no other tools to influence Kyiv except the threat of force and the use of force. The other diplomatic tools are really limited."⁶³

Notably, on May 26, the Russian MoD announced that it began to redeploy more than 100 aircraft and helicopters from the Kuban and Rostov regions, which border Ukraine, to their permanent airfields in Stavropol, Astrakhan, and Volgograd.⁶⁴ This came after "constructive" meetings between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov with Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Russian Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev with American National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan. The Russian newspaper *Kommersant* reported that the proposed summit between Presidents Putin and Biden would largely depend on how well those meetings went.⁶⁵ After their success, Russia formally agreed to the summit on May 24.

Thus, Russia likely decided to pull back the fighters, attack aircraft, bombers, and

63 Henry Foy, "Putin's sabre-rattling wins west's attention and Biden summit," *Financial Times*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/214a08e4-b50c-43e3-8cb6-8818ec5bd5f2?>.

64 "Авиация ЮВО провела масштабное перебазирование на оперативные аэродромы в рамках учения," Russian Ministry of Defense, May 26, 2021, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12363416@egNews.

65 Elena Chernenko, "Россия и США нащупывают маршруты друг к другу," *Kommersant*, May 18, 2021, <https://www.kommersant.ru/amp/4816102>.

helicopters on May 26 once they were satisfied with American intentions after the meetings with Blinken and Sullivan. Russian officials were pleased with the summit's results—both sides agreed to return their ambassadors and to hold further strategic arms limitations talks. Since the summit, Russia has not raised tensions in Ukraine; however, the last of its reinforcements from April and May likely will not leave the region until after the Zapad 2021 strategic exercise in September. As a result, Russia will retain sufficient combat power near Ukraine's borders to quickly escalate. This capability will provide an enhanced deterrent threat until at least the fall, by which time Russia should have a better understanding of the Biden administration's intentions towards Russia. 



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